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BOOKISHNESS AND STATESMANSHIP.*

BY THE RIGHT HON. THE EARL OF ROSEBERY, K.G.

BOOKISHNESS and statesmanship are, one would think, scarcely compatible. Nothing, indeed, could seem more discordant and incompatible than the life of the library and the life of politics. The man of books may steal through life like a shadow, happy with his simple pleasures, like a caterpillar on a broad, green leaf, untortured by the travail of authorship or the candor of the critic, and leave it with his name unknown, until his library be sold, should he perchance have books to sell.

The man of politics leads possibly a more useful, certainly a more arduous, career. He lives in the public eye, almost in the public grasp. Out-of-doors, there is the reporter; in the seclusion of his home, there is the interviewer; both, presumably, hungry to receive the ideas as they pass through his capacious brain; though some go so far as to declare that the interviewer and the reporter are less the seekers than the sought, less the pursuers than the pursued.

Alert, bustling, visible, deriving even a certain popularity from the fact of being known by sight; speaking to his engagements whether he has anything to say or not; appearing on his platform whether he be brisk and well, or sick and sorry—like an actor, only that he has to find his own words; bringing together and keeping together, as well as may be, all sorts and conditions of men; with one eye apparently on the political weather, and the other, it is to be hoped, on his political conscience,—which is usually kept for him by a number of other people—a hurricane of a life, the essential quality of which is publicity.

I refer only to obvious externals, and only enough of these to indicate the natural antipathy between the life of politics and

* The substance of an address delivered at Edinburgh some time ago.

the life of books. Yet Mr. Gladstone, who rode the whirlwind and directed the storm of politics, was bookish to an extreme degree. He had not, indeed, reached the superlative and morbid form of bookishness when a man is called a "book-worm." The fresh breezes of a thousand active interests prevented such a development. But, with encouragement and fostering circumstances, had he been nurtured in literary traditions, like his great rival, had his health been feeble, it is not difficult to imagine him a book-worm, immersed in folios.

But as things were, he loved books as much as a man may without a suspicion of bibliomania. As a matter of fact, he had none of what is technically called bibliomania; to first editions, or broad margins, or vellum copies he was indifferent.

Had he been a very wealthy man, even this form of the noble disease might have taken him. As it was, he loved collecting, buying, handling books. It was a joy to him to arrange with his own hands the books in his library. It was a sport to him to hunt down books in sale catalogues. It was a sacred trust to him to preserve the little treasures of his youth—a classic or two that he had at Eton, the book given to him by Hannah More.

No one could have seen him reading in the Temple of Peace, as he significantly called his study, and have deemed it possible for him to be happy in any other capacity. Those who had witnessed that sight must have felt persuaded that, when he retired from public life in 1875, nothing could ever draw him from his beloved retreat. They might well have anticipated that with old books, old friends, old trees, with a hundred avenues of study to complete or explore, with a vast experience of life and affairs to discuss, with trees to cut and plant and worship—for he was a tree-worshipper as well—and, above all, with the vital core and responsibility of a living faith pervading him, he might well rest and be thankful.

It was his extraordinary energy, enthusiasm and faith in great causes that were the salt that prevented his stagnation into mere bookishness. But he had another safeguard still. It was his principle in reading to make his exports balance his imports—he took in a great deal, but he put forth a great deal. His close study of a book was pretty sure to precede an article on it.

I reckon over all this to explain, as far as I can, the paradox of a bookman who was at the same time a man of practical busi-

ness and affairs; one of the rarest of all combinations. Take the case of Prime Ministers as an average representation of men of affairs. Harley was a book-lover, but even he was rather a collector than a reader. Bolingbroke, who was perhaps Prime Minister for a few hours, was a book-lover after his fall, or said he was. Stanhope had a library which still exists at Chevening, preserved in a separate room—a priceless example of the book collection of a Minister in the eighteenth century. Sunderland founded a great library. Then we come to Walpole. The sublime solace of books, which soothed even the gnawing ambition of his fiercest enemy, was denied to him. No one deplored this after his resignation more than himself. Once, on finding a friend reading in his own library at Houghton, he expressed this feeling: “I wish I took as much delight in reading as you do; it would be the means of alleviating many tedious hours in my present retirement; but, to my misfortune, I derive no pleasure from such pursuits.” Again, in the same room he said to Henry Fox: “You can read. It is a great happiness. I totally neglected it when I was in business, which has been the whole of my life, and to such a degree that I cannot now read a page—a warning to all Ministers.”

From Walpole onwards, we meet with no bookish Prime Minister till we get to Lord Grenville. He was, no doubt, a man of strong literary tastes, but does not come into competition with Mr. Gladstone as an omnivorous reader. But a friend who used to visit him gives a picture of his old age, sitting summer and winter on the same sofa, with his favorite books on the shelves just over his head—Roger Ascham among them, Milton always within reach. He, at any rate, in his sixty-sixth year was clear as to the choice between literature and politics.

The next possibly bookish Prime Minister was Canning; but, with a literary side all his life, he was only Prime Minister for a few months. Melbourne was a great reader, and like Mr. Gladstone a great reader of theology; but he left behind him a library of odd volumes, which puts him out of the category of book-lovers. Sir Robert Peel, like some of the statesmen of the last century, came to the business of politics as a brilliant specimen of Oxford scholarship. Lord John Russell was, perhaps, more of a writer than a reader of books. The only book, I think, mentioned by Lord Palmerston in his correspondence is “Con-

ingsby." Then we come to the author of "Coningsby," "born," as he says, "in a library," more bookish, perhaps, than Mr. Gladstone in early, and less in later, life.

Once, when I was a child, I was taken to see Hatfield. In the library, we saw a tall, thin figure carrying a huge volume. The housekeeper paused, with awe, saying, "That is Lord Robert Cecil." It was a bookish figure, then outside politics, but later Prime Minister.

Shall we find outside the list of Prime Ministers many in the secure latitudes of the past who compete with Mr. Gladstone as being bookish men in high ministerial office? Clarendon is beyond my horizon. There is Addison, who was a Secretary of State, but so indifferent a one as to fail entirely in one point of comparison. There is Burke, a mighty force in politics and in letters, but never in such office as to demonstrate himself a great Minister; any more than Charles James Fox, who held office for too short a time. Charles Fox had a real passion for literature, could talk of it the whole day and over the whole range of it. He, I think, in a real love of books, approaches most nearly to Mr. Gladstone, and both had a common devotion to Homer. Homer was the author Charles Fox most loved to read; but he would also read all the novels he could get hold of. In conversation, he would range over the whole field of literature, with zest and passion, without apparently once straying into politics. A friend has recorded how in a day he would discuss Homer and Virgil, Æschylus and Euripides, Milton and Massinger, Pope and Addison, Gibbon and Blackstone, Sophocles and Shakespeare, Metastasio, Congreve and Vanbrugh, Cowper, Fielding, Burns. He almost convinces himself that Burns is a better poet than Cowper! But he concludes by saying, finely enough, that poetry is the great refreshment of the human mind. No one, surely, can deny that Fox was a man of books. But he is not a parallel for the combination which in Mr. Gladstone was unique, in that he was only a Minister for a few months, once under circumstances dubious, if not sinister, and once when dying. He was not then, as Gladstone was, carrying on simultaneously a great career as a statesman in office and a delightful life in a library.

Moreover, all this except in the case of the History of James II, which slumbers on our shelves in majestic quarto, was without result. Nor was there in him, as I read him, the passionate

concentration and practical application of reading that we saw in Mr. Gladstone. "His Favorite Sultana Queen," as with his royal ancestors, "was sauntering," and sauntering was abhorrent and impossible to Mr. Gladstone. Charles Fox, at any rate, after ruining himself at cards, could sit down and derive an instant solace from Theocritus.

As a rule, the public men of the last century seem to have been fairly well equipped in what Captain Dalgetty called "the humanities"; they would have blushed not to understand, or not to appear to understand, a Latin quotation; they could bandy and hit over them as Pulteney did with Walpole, but they do not seem to have been men of books. There are, perhaps, two signal exceptions, and I do not feel perfectly sure of even one of these two; I mean Carteret and Chesterfield.

The great exemplar in the eighteenth century of the combination of literature and politics was, undoubtedly, Chesterfield. Perhaps the only startling deficiency in his intellectual equipment was his unaccountable ignorance of the mother tongue of that Hanoverian dynasty which he was so anxious to serve. It is difficult to understand on what claim or merit was based Chesterfield's literary throne. That he occupied one is sufficiently evident from the fact that Johnson, who was no courtier, had thought of dedicating his Dictionary to him. A few essays, more or less anonymous, were all the productions known to his contemporaries—essays which appeal but little to us. His letters to his son and to his godson, on which rests his fame, and which to some of us seem dreary enough, were posthumous.

In these letters, however, we find symptoms of his bookishness. From them we may suppose him versed in the literature of his own country, of France and perhaps of Italy. In England, his idol is Bolingbroke. In France, he sees such perfection that one would infer that he worships there a literary polytheism. The only Italian poets that he thinks worth reading are Tasso and Ariosto. He deliberately excludes Dante, a veto which seems an abiding slur on his perception; and which in Mr. Gladstone's judgment would have constituted him a sort of literary outlaw.

In spite of Chesterfield's undoubted love of reading, he places on record an injunction which strikes him altogether out of the category of thorough bookishness. "Lay aside," he solemnly says, "the best book whenever you can go into the best company;

and, depend upon it, you change for the better." Perhaps when we remember that the best society, in the highest sense, is rarely attainable, he is right. But we might not all agree as to what constitutes the best society.

I believe that nowhere in history, so far as I know, is there an instance of so intensely bookish a man as Mr. Gladstone, who was at the same time so consummate a man of affairs. I mean by bookishness the general love of books — reading, buying, handling, hunting them. The combination in his case is unique, and it will probably remain so. Day by day, the calls of public life become more and more exacting, absorbing, imperious. Each fresh development of them makes them more and more unsuitable for the student and the recluse. Literature is constantly becoming less and less necessary for the politician. During the first half of the past century, a classical quotation was considered the indispensable ornament of a parliamentary speech.

Among great men of action, we recall Frederick's love of letters, and Napoleon's travelling library. Among statesmen, we think of Pitt's sofa with its shelf of thumbed classics; and of Fox, a far more ardent lover of books, exchanging them and his garden for the House of Commons almost with tears; and of Gladstone's Temple of Peace. Surely, even if it be not the best, it is the happiest way. There is not, perhaps, too much happiness in the life of any statesman. But no one who knew him could think of Mr. Gladstone otherwise than as being happy, and one of the main sources of his happiness was his bookishness. Where, as in his case, the mind absorbs and uses the books, and the books do not cloud and embarrass the mind, the purpose of the statesman and the eloquence of the orator gather force from books as a river takes the hues and gathers up the springs of the region it traverses.

There is no royal road to success in public life; what suits one will not suit another. But putting politics and success out of the question, if a man wants to develop his faculties to the utmost advantage, and to combine the greatest amount of work with the greatest amount of happiness, he cannot do better than imitate the methods of study, the economy of time and the regularity of life practised by the illustrious Mr. Gladstone.

ROSEBERRY.